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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000881

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: A TIV PERSPECTIVE ON THE BENUE/TARABA
CONFLICT

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER FOR REASONS 1.5
(B) AND(D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: A February 14 dinner hosted by Governor Akume gave the Ambassador an eye on the Tiv worldview. Parochial and biased, it is shared by Benue Tiv leaders ranging from Senator Gyado to ex-COAS Malu and posits that the Tiv are victims of systematic discrimination. However, these Tiv elites offered no practical steps to resolve the growing conflict between Tivs and neighboring ethnic groups. Aggressive Tiv ethno-centrism is but one issue Nigeria's leaders must manage. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Ambassador Jeter was in Benue State February 14/15 to commission an USAID-funded Rice Mill operated by a Benue State NGO that focuses its assistance on children affected by HIV/AIDS. Benue has Nigeria's highest sero-positivity rate.

13. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by the USAID Director and Staff Assistant (note-taker), paid a visit to Governor George Akume in Makurdi, the Benue State capital. The clashes between Tivs and neighboring ethnic groups in Benue and other states dominated the dinner discussion. Most of the people at the dinner were Tiv luminaries whose constant theme was: as the Tivs fare, so fares Nigeria. Right now, neither was doing particularly well. Among those present were former Senate President Jacob (Jack) Tilley Gyado, dismissed Chief of Army Staff Victor Malu.

14. (C) These members of the Benue State elite stressed that many Tivs are former soldiers, still armed and ready to take action if they perceive that Tiv interests are threatened. They also noted that Tiv farmers are responsible for a significant portion of the country's agricultural output. Unrest in and around Tiv-dominated Benue means reduced food availability and increased risk of violent political unrest, they argued.

15. (C) Governor Akume reiterated claims that the recent Tiv-Jukun violence arose from Jukun efforts to drive Tivs from Taraba. There was a clear consensus that the Tivs who allegedly killed 19 soldiers actually may have killed Jukuns dressed as soldiers or, at least, thought they were killing Jukuns dressed as soldiers. The Governor also claimed that the killing of Tivs by the Army continues "unabated," citing a January 26 incident in which at least 10 Tivs reportedly died when a Tiv village was burned.

16. (C) Noting that the Tivs are often viewed as strangers when they move into new areas, the dinner guests said Tivs have been excluded from the political process in Taraba and even prevented from practicing their traditional culture. The leaders claimed that in Tiv-majority areas, on the other hand, they respect the culture of minorities and include them in the political process.

17. (C) In response to a question from the Ambassador, the leaders claimed that Tiv agriculture was not expansionists, that farmers do move from plot to plot, but usually within a defined area. The guests acknowledged that Tiv population growth requires bringing steadily more land under this system of rotating cultivation but claimed that this should not present a problem since only about 15 percent of the arable land in Nigeria is currently being used. Therefore, the Tivs' "expansionary" agriculture does not threaten the viability of other groups.

18. (C) Discrimination against Tivs, the group said, extends to the federal government. They contrasted the GON response to the victims of the recent Ikeja armory explosions with its failure to provide support to the victims of the Benue-Taraba conflict. They noted that MoD Danjuma is a Jukun and commented that President Obasanjo's failure to visit or express condolences had damaged his

image among Tivs.

19. (C) The Ambassador asked for ideas on finding a solution to the perennial conflicts between Tivs and other tribes. The group offered no realistic remedies, making only vague references to a need for "more political will" and recognition by other groups of the right of Tivs to "exist" and practice their culture.

110. (C) Comment: No ethnic group bordering Tivland is currently at ease with the Tiv. Their aggressive approach to bringing land under cultivation undermines the cultures of many of these groups (some of which are pastoral). While the Tiv may "permit" minority groups in Tivland to practice their cultures or participate in politics, there is never any danger of the Tivs losing control. Moreover, say some non-Tivs, Tiv culture incorporates aspects of tradition that are no longer compatible with Nigerian law. After over a century of Tiv encroachment, the groups bordering Tivland will no longer stand idly by as they become minorities in their home areas. Loss of control of a Local Government Area Council means loss of federal government revenue allotted to it. Therein may lie the root cause of often-violent conflict among the Tiv and their neighbors.
JETER